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Engaging the Digital Generation in Academic Literacy 29th June 2010

The Self-Editor: a strategy for improving reflective writing.

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Abstract:

A strategy to help students meet reflective writing and critical self-analysis required in Work Based Learning courses, using a strategy based on 'tricks of the trade' by professional writers, as an alternative to a 'basics skills' approach. Students invariably submit early drafts with 'All the right content, but not necessarily in the right order!' - to take a theme from a well-known comedian.

The strategy proposes a framework for student feedback given by staff: first, the use of 'call out' notes in Adobe PDF, illustrates how students are guided to re-cast copy; second, the Self-Editor, a staged framework for improving writing offers students a practical method to encourage self-awareness of what is good practice.

Try The Self-Editor in this workshop demonstration. Delegates might gain the most from of the session by bringing a paragraph of writing: student work or their own material as:

- a) Printed text - follow the sequence of the Self- Editor on paper (14 point, double line spaced, several copies).
- b) Digital Word File - follow the sequence on screen for everyone to share in real-time (USB).

Mike Howarth draws on his editing, scripting and creative writing experience. The paper summaries eye search and neuroscience theories that inform the Self –Editor strategy.

1.00 Introduction

The paper begins with the background to the problem, framing the situation in which a strategy for improving reflective writing is required. Next, an outline of two methods for improving writing the PDF feedback method and then the learning resource for students called the Self-Editor and the features of the strategy. Research that informs the strategy follows, for the reader interested in the research informing the approach.

A practical hands-on active approach is an alternative to the conventional 'basic skills', 'academic writing', 'essay writing', or the method of 'using good examples' as forms of instructional design. The title itself 'Tricks of the Trade' is a specific attempt to lure, entice, market – to engage with the particular audience.

Most important, writing advice is integral to the tutor's feedback process. The objective of the strategy is to promote good writing as a means to self - understanding, clarity of thought - inner thought expressed clearly, and an external physical manifestation of inner personal potential. The potential benefits are too great

task to leave to chance that the student will discover the process for themselves in the library, in handouts or by trial and error.

2. Framing the strategy

2.1 The profile of Work Based Learning students

‘An IWBL programme consists usually of three main stages. The objective is to attain the necessary credits to fulfil the particular degree requirements (Garnett, 2000). The necessary credits are currently recorded on the Registration & Programme Progression (RPP) form. First, the candidate negotiates and organises credits of prior experiential learning and submits a portfolio of that evidence to receive recognition and accreditation (RAL). Secondly, the individual programme plan is negotiated with the WBL candidate to devise a pathway for their learning experience through the IWBL system. As part of the second, individual programme plan stage, the learner takes a course in research techniques to prepare them for the final project stage. At the third final stage candidates conduct a work based research project which must relate to the context of their professional work environment. In effect, candidates are required to be practitioner researchers and agents of change.’ (Howarth, 2009)

‘Our individualised learning curriculum follows a learner-managed-learning approach to take professionals through (Boud, 2001) . First, a portfolio is constructed to accredit prior experiential learning (APEL). Next, a programme plan is designed to build from that foundation to a complete degree. This includes tutorial support in conducting research in the work place. Finally, a project phase sees the ‘practitioner researcher’ implementing a study in their organisation. Since we offer this programme world-wide at a distance the WBL candidates can feel isolated (Stephenson, 2006). We offer face-to-face seminars at our London campus and international offices to support this learning experience, but busy professionals are not always able to attend.’ (Basiel, 2008)

2.2 The Reflective Process

Students are required to write about their past and current learning experience, their own learning achievements and recognise the impact on their work place. Writing is encouraged to be in the first person. Evidence is required for claims for their Areas of Learning. The advantage is that the student is released from the strictures of academic writing. The process of externalising, very often for the first time personal experience and knowledge and abilities on paper, is indeed a cathartic experience. The disadvantage is that quality of writing, often of the stream of consciousness kind, is inadequate to the course requirement ‘to analyse and draw conclusions’ about experiences. Students who are isolated in their learning environment can find this requirement quite hard to achieve.

The process is powerful medicine, as I have experienced myself in the programme adviser’s training, taking a PG Cert in WBL, (despite a Cert Ed, years in classrooms and seven years HE teaching). Staff who have been through a similar process will bear witness. I also ‘see’ the quality of the experience through the viewfinder, as I interview and video them for the IWBL area in MDX Play. This may mean little

unless you actually experience putting down on paper all the activities in which one is professional engaged; the learning over the years, analysing and synthesising those area of learning in which you consider you excel, and finally provide evidence to support your claim. Students have to do this work themselves and this means editing their own work - a difficult double challenge for anyone.

2.3 The Student Handbooks

A programme adviser and a consultant are assigned to students but it is the student's stated responsibility to organise their learning, read the extensive handbooks and contact the advisers to request assistance. The handbooks are lengthy and despite recent revisions are a challenge to the busy non-academic used to slick to the point commercial training products and company learning manuals – in my opinion.

The handbooks suffer from what I call 'appendicitis'; the key elements of the story are not integral but only referred to in the text. The real material is the appendix. The argument is therefore very difficult for anyone to follow. Where this house style comes from is a mystery. Perhaps it is the practice of requiring students to write text with evidence referred to in the appendix. Other issues abound: administrative forms are mixed up with the course information, information on core subjects, and learning activities, which are frequently different to the actual work that has to be handed in. What has to be handed in is often a list of buried well into the document at the bottom of a page and usually poorly signposted with a light grey heading. It is not surprising that students spend so much time trying to work out what is required of them; it is too late to write coherently. Nevertheless, I know from my students, they have a hard task; work comes in late and it does not do justice to the quality of their experience and skills.

3. Tools to aid the student in an on-line digital environment

3.1 Feedback using PDF and Callouts

Students' send in their work in Word format. I immediately print as PDF and add my reference to the filename. I am using Acrobat 9 Pro which is different to the Acrobat most people know about – the Reader. Acrobat 9 Pro is the full software for creating not just PDF text but fillable forms and JavaScript coding integrated video and audio and portfolios. It is fiendishly complex, but one part is simple; the addition of 'call outs', demonstrated in *Figure 1* - notated comments on the text; an arrow to the relevant text and commentary on the issue arising.

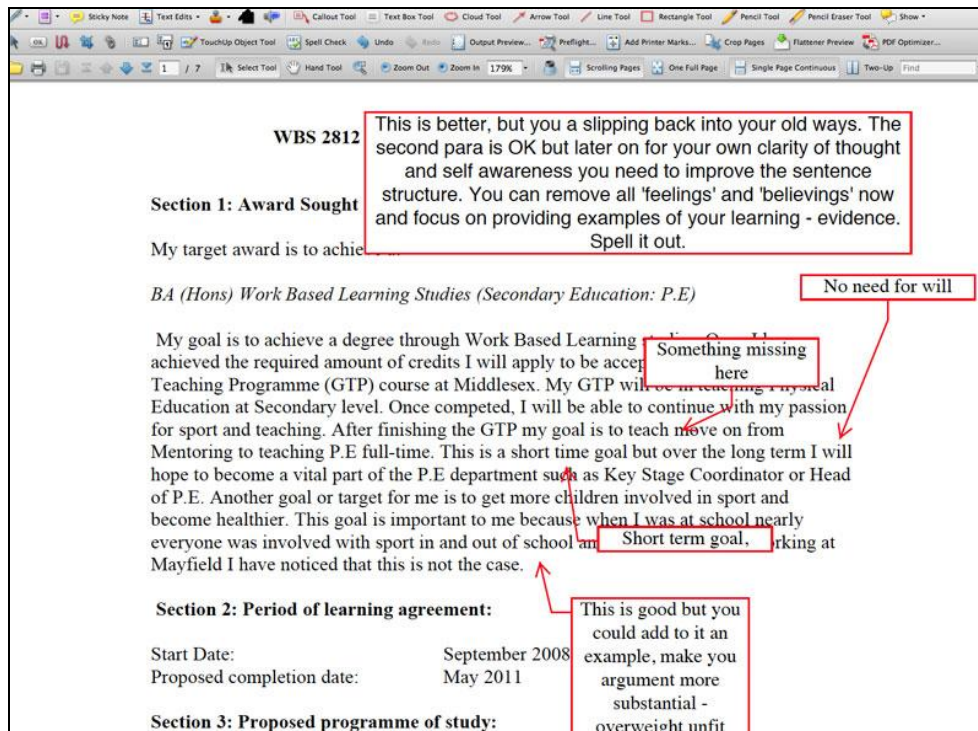


Fig 1: The call out method for providing feedback using Adobe Acrobat 9 software.

3.2 The feedback commentary

The commentary is of a particular type. I do not often write an academic treatise on the content in relation to the need for reflection and analysis. I am advising on how to bring out key points in the order of importance, how to make the message clear, how to provide the structure to bring out the analysis and synthesis and the evidence which students tend to bury in long sentences – the rushed unburdening of the experience. Students have frequently stated they have not written in this form since leaving college.

Focus on the key elements of writing structure has the following advantages:

- A framework is provided for the student that is easy to follow.
- Advice is practical not conceptual.
- Students can make changes easily and see the results quickly
- The results gives them confidence to progress.
- Tutor time is reduced.

The valuable achievability of goals set and pleasure and confidence in gaining them is informed by (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992).

4. The Self-Editor

The Self-Editor is very simple; it is a series of writing tasks to demonstrate how to improve the quality of writing oneself. Just a paragraph is needed, as invariably the errors of style are repeated throughout the work.

The sequence of events in the Self-Editor have no theoretical background. However, they are in order of the frequency of their occurrence and the trouble they cause. They are the most problematic issues I perceive that hamper the student's achievement of self-understanding and clarity of self.

The Instructions

One of the most difficult writing tasks for anyone to do is to edit your own material.

- Take a paragraph, carry out one editing action, then copy and paste in to the section below.
- Replace the Lorem Ipsum text below (Lorem ipsum is dummy text used in the printing industry) and create - 1.5 line spacing for easy reading.
- Adapt the sequence to match your own pattern of errors, once you recognise.
- Video examples and other resources available at: www.mhmvr.com

The Self Editor: Writer's Tricks of the Trade

Activity 1:

Remove As, Like, To When, If, Although (prepositions) from the beginning of each sentence:

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Etiam metus. Donec et felis vel diam tempus interdum. Aenean elit. In quis mi. Sed ac turpis. Etiam molestie dui et nisi. Phasellus eu ligula eget metus laoreet rhoncus. Integer tempus. Nullam convallis turpis. Duis laoreet velit sed lorem.
(Copy and paste your text into section 2 below)

Activity 2:

Break up each long sentence:

Make sure there is only one idea, concept event, or a fact per sentence.
(Copy and paste your text into section 3 below)

Activity 3:

Make sure each sentence has the most important idea or key words at the front of the sentence:

(Copy and paste etc)

Activity 4:

Remove any unnecessary 'weasel' words:

In the text remove and "which, when", "and in case of".
(Copy and paste copy from completed activity above)

Activity 5:

Draw a circle round the keyword idea in the first sentence and link with lines to related keywords in sentence two:

Aim to have one clear link of circles and lines from beginning to end of paragraph. The reader will find the paragraph easier to understand - honest.

(Copy and paste copy from completed activity above)

Activity 6:

Walk up and down reading the paragraph out aloud:

Underline any sections that don't seem to read well. Follow your gut reaction to any sections that do not seem to make sense.

Activity 7:

Sit down and edit paragraph again:

Make changes, shuffle words around.

(Copy and paste copy from completed activity above)

Activity 8:

Review paragraph structure:

Take the main idea in the last paragraph and make sure the reader knows clearly what your summary point(s) is in the first sentence.

(Copy and paste copy from completed activity above)

Activity 9:

Walk up and down, read out aloud, edit afresh:

Leave for a day and do the whole thing again. Rewriting is quite normal professional activity and it is advisable that you leave time to do this essential task.

(Copy and paste copy from completed activity above)

Activity 10:

Apply the method to each paragraph, section and finally your whole paper:

The Final Edit

When all is as 'good as it gets':

- **Read from back to front** to spot punctuation errors.
- **Read from back to front** to spot spelling errors.
- **Check** diagram numbering and make references to diagrams in text.
- **Check** Reference style (Harvard) methods in text.
- **Check** Reference style (Harvard) and layout method in the Bibliography section at end of paper.

4.1 The development of the Self – Editor method

4.1.1 Writing in a professional environment

I know little of formal English grammar, usage or syntax, only a few tricks of the trade after many years of the regime summarised below. These are some features of my experience as a jobbing writer:

- Any writing or media task began with a written proposal presented for discussion at national committee level (under a portrait of Lord Reith!).
- Every word written is a collaboration with several people.
- Writing is always to tight deadlines.
- Each sentence is rewritten several times as the norm.
- Live on-air editing, on location and in the studio.
- Much of my writing and text editing has been done standing up, often in a field.
- Written work is not published unless it has been proofed at least three times.
- A senior executive will pass your writing before broadcast.
- There is always someone at your elbow who can do the job better than you.
- You lose your job if material is not of the highest standard.

Writing was just a daily fight to meet deadlines and make the best possible broadcast.

4.1.2 Facilitating student writing

West Herts College, degree and post graduate certificates courses in media, printing and publishing required a tutor for project supervision. So besides my new media teaching, I rediscovered a use for the writing skills, that in the stress of it all, I had been happy to leave behind. I also found it was possible to supervise fast track editing of up to 20 students at a time, whizzing on my lab chair from student to student, as I made them work in real-time on their writing in the computer room. I made them read out their sentences from the computer screen, challenging them to move the words around to improve the sense of what students wanted to say, and apply their learning to the rest of their text. The discipline of developing an academic writing style for my PhD at the same time helped. What a change from writing a 9' 50" dramatic emotional broadcast script. Writing might just become enjoyable again.

The Self- Editor developed several years later running adult education evening creative writing courses at Herts Regional College. A computer suite was the only room available so I tried the same 'mass editing' procedures. The adults responded with enthusiasm to the practical rather than theoretical approach. Their inspiring feedback informed my research into structure of story. Conversations with them during these hands-on writing sessions could be the subject of another paper. The introduction to story writing structures is explored by (Campbell, 1988) and through building blocks of language (Ackroyd, 2002). Suffice to say I found a synthesis for the physical component in the structure of writing that builds on my research into eye search physiology and the experiential metaphorical concept of the writing experience. In the next section are some of the findings that inform the approach.

5. Background

5.2 A physiological view of writing for reading

Perhaps it is the pressure of writing and editing, reading out aloud, eye strain and

thick glasses that predisposes the interest in physical component of writing. The fovea is a small depression in the central region of the retina containing only cones, which are colour sensitive and capable of finer resolution of images. (Gregory, 1974) (1974) described the foveal area as 1 degree of visual field and being of greater acuity consisting of 2,000 cones, with the edge of the retina sensitive to movement, noting that when movement stops the object becomes invisible. The foveal oval was also termed the foveal lobe. (Hall, 1969) describes the two fields of view – the foveal oval and the wide-angle view – as ‘together creating an illusion of broad band clear vision.’ The foveal oval represented an area in the scene which was: ‘quarter of an inch wide at a distance of 12 inches from the eye. It extends 12°-15° in the horizontal and 3° in the vertical within the larger area of the ocular field of vision covering 90°.’ Figure 2 simulates the area of sharp focus indicated by the centre circle and unconscious effect to the blurring of the edges. The average person, and especially a child is unaware of the phenomenon. The illustration does not fully accurately visualise the true oval shape of the fovea’s area of acute vision as described by Hall or the extent of the field of view.



Figure 2: Double Portrait Tate Exhibition Wellcome Trust Sci-Art Project: The Painter's Eye Movements, 1991.(Ocean and Tchalenko, 1998)

The effect of a concentrated field of clarity that the foveal oval provides was further enhanced by the shape of the eyeball and a vertical plane such as a computer screen. First, the spherical plane of field of view in focus created by the shape of the eyeball, ensures that the edge of computer screen surface was naturally out of focus when a user was focusing on a narrow central area of the screen owing to the curvature of the eye lens.

Eye scan technology provides a visualisation of eye brain co-ordination and is a vast field that possibly supports how keywords and visual linking and navigation work. For an introductions see (Pirolli, 2007) and (Imotions, 2010) and for technology (Technology, Imotions, 2010).

5.3 A physical perspective of metaphor **The Experiential Metaphorical Concept**

Lakoff and Johnson questioned the Anglo-American philosophic and linguistic tradition of metaphor. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) definition of metaphor as ‘understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another’, appears simple. However, they stress ‘In actuality we feel that no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis’

(1980, p. 19). They consider metaphor as primarily a matter of thought and action and only derivatively a matter of language. The primary claim of their position is that metaphors are not arbitrary, but instead is a natural outgrowth of the manner in which our minds are constituted. They stress the concepts that occur in metaphorical definitions are those that corresponded to natural experience. They offer human concern to be primarily with physical orientations, objects, substances and seeing. Furthermore, these concerns sit within overriding ‘container’ metaphors of the natural world:

We are physical beings bounded and set off from the rest of the world by the surface of our skins, and we experience the rest of the world as outside us. Each of us is a container, with bounding surface and an in-out orientation. (p. 29)

‘Container’ metaphors are ontological metaphors that help with orientation – up down, front-back. The container metaphor does more than that also defined our ways of viewing events, activity and emotions as entities and substances (p. 25). Ideas become entities – objects. Therefore, it is possible to say “I pressed the computer key and got *the solution to my problem*”, where the solution is an object. Also using the Mind as a Container (a machine) metaphor for example enables us to say I “can’t *get my mind round* this computer program today.”

The significance of container metaphors to the thesis is that Lakoff and Johnson identify the physical relationship between the user and the computer in one inclusive concept – the container and the visual field – in effect subsuming the visual field container within the mind as container:

We conceptualise our visual field as a container and conceptualise what we see as being inside it. Even the term ‘visual field’ suggests this. The metaphor is a natural one that emerges from the fact that when you look at some territory (land, floor space, etc.), your field of vision defines a boundary of the territory, namely, the part that you can see. Given that a bounded physical space is a container and that our field of vision correlates with that bounded physical space, the metaphorical concept, and visual fields are containers emerges naturally. Thus, we can say, ‘The ship is coming into view.’ ‘I have him in sight.’ ‘I can’t see him the tree is in the way.’ ‘He’s out of sight now’. ‘That’s in the centre of my field of vision’. ‘There’s nothing in sight.’ ‘I can’t get all of the ships in sight at once.’ (p. 30)

The developments in this field have turned to the concept of embodiment (Feldman, 2006) and further to neuroscience (Lakoff, 2009). As a simplified example of a complex field of how the process works: “I am sick” - lights up one area of the brain. “I am as sick as a parrot” - the brain goes crazy. Though neural imaging techniques develop so the evidence relationship of language and body become more complex (Singer, 2009).

5.4 The metaphorical ‘navigation through text’ concept

This section is a case study example of the metaphor ‘navigation’ re-evaluated in the light of Lakoff and Johnson’s theory, and illuminates further the general issues

outlined in the previous section. It is a chronological description of the evolution of navigation in the context of that development culminated in suggesting the possibility of an improved metaphorical model as a three-dimensional construct within a higher order 3-D navigation metaphor – ‘container’.

The navigation metaphor is arguably the most quoted and discussed interface metaphor, and is important in terms of computer operations used in several contexts. For example, navigation forms a key element in the design of a multimedia product, as authors’ structure a user’s experience of the product. In addition, users describe the process of navigating their way round the product. Writers describe the multimedia product operations in terms of difficulty or ease of the process of navigation.

The navigation metaphor is not a new concept. For example, it has a literary tradition in 2-D text as in Figure 3 (Chapman, 1987) uses chaining, register, cohesion, ellipsis, conjunction, and co-location.

"Let' start at once, said Roger, but at that moment
the kettle changed its tune.
It had been bubbling for some time, but now
it hissed quietly and steadily, and a long
jet of steam poured from its spout.
The water was boiling, Susan took the kettle
from the fire, and emptied into it a small packet of tea.

Figure 3: Trails of connectivity between key word themes. (Chapman, 1987, p.93)

Chapman measures the quality of reading texts by physically drawing ‘routes’ through text. Relational lines between key words in a story are ‘mapped’. Text with continuous lines of communication through a paragraph is easier to read – more easily physically navigated by the human eye.

I recognise in my own script writing field certain aspects of the navigation process in creative writing, setting a scene, moving the action, going on a journey, in the physical structure of the script itself.

‘Routes’ and ‘journey’ navigation metaphors exist in audio terms too. An example from the *Starcatcher* script in Figure 3 was used based on the researcher’s own experience as a radio producer to illustrate the radio equivalent. The figure shows the journey structure of a typical radio script with the Narrator (Robert) introduces the subject and provides information. The sound effects (FX/Music) provides a transition or bridge and gives an audio clue to carry the listener to a fictional ‘place’ using a magical sound effect (FX: shooting star) for emphasis. The narrator intervenes again with factual material, in this case ideas how children can sing a song, guides the listener on a journey, who navigates the story with audio signposts children recognise through experience.



Figure 4: A visual representation of how the metaphor ‘navigation’ operates in a conventional children’s drama script. (Howarth, 1995)

In a radio script production there are also navigation metaphors of: ‘a journey’, a good ‘beginning’, two or three ‘high points’, ‘signposts’ of narration and sound effects ‘signaling’, at most five key teaching features, and ‘arriving’ at a good ‘ending’ in a radio production. Features of all effective education broadcasts were; a narrator who told users what they were about to learn, a ‘transition’ sound effects (FX) or music to set up the example – typically a drama fantasy illustrating the point, there was a return, via a transition, to the real world – the narrator – and a repetition of the teaching point. The switch from real world to fantasy world placed in a radio script was ‘navigation’ – an audio ‘journey in 2-D’. The ‘journey’ does not work with quick jumps (except in moderation, to attract the listener’s attention). It is the slow, musical bridges or sound effects, which help users to navigate their way, take along the journey. The navigation metaphor in education radio deserves a much deeper study than was possible here.

6. Summary

The paper attempts a synthesis of theory and real world experiences to bring together a tailored, appropriate approach to assist work based learning students to achieve their goal – writing that expresses what they want to say in a well-ordered and easy to read style. Writing that meets the needs of academic requirements, but more important gives the author a satisfaction in the externalising of achievements in the past and a sound base for future action.

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